Chiropractic's Abraham Flexner: The Lonely Journey of John J. Nugent, 1935-1963

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Fifty years ago, a relatively unknown chiropractor with an unusual background intruded into the "orthodoxy" of institutional chiropractic. John Nugent (1891-1979) was to become to chiropractic in its survival period what Abraham Flexner had been to medicine a generation earlier. To some, his was the "most hated name in chiropractic," yet he would contribute as no other in the reform of chiropractic education.

Fifty years ago, in the fall of 1935 and in the unlikely location of Hollywood, California, a 44-year old chiropractor who claimed only five years in practice emerged as the cutting edge of what would be a classic reformation within his profession. John Joseph Nugent, Irish-born and already tested in combat with the self-proclaimed titular ruler of chiropractic, set forth on a mission that would reward him with extreme vituperation, endless enemies and questionable recognition by his colleagues in combat. In time, though, he would be to chiropractic education what Abraham Flexner had been to modern medical education.

Nugent was atypical of most of the practitioners who characterized chiropractic in that depression year, which at 40 was still consigned as but a meddlesome cult by most of orthodoxy, without scientific merit, woefully lacking in educational standards and seemingly destined to follow other irregular schools into a medical limbo. Virtually all who held themselves out as chiropractors had at best the standard 18-month schooling that led to their D.C. "We were still in the trade school period then,"[1] said a pioneer of chiropractic politics.

John Nugent, however, carried himself with a convincing manner and with a touch of arrogance. He was a 1922 graduate of the Palmer School, yet he claimed a classical education at the National University of Dublin before emigrating to the United States in 1914 at the outbreak of the First World War. Selected for a special Officer Candidate program at West Point, he was discharged and later given citizenship in a ceremony at the famous military academy in 1917. Later, as assistant to the president of an eastern railroad, he was accepted at Yale Law School but decided against a career in law.[2]

"He was articulate, well-educated, well-dressed and of impressive bearing," said John B. Wolfe, one of the many chiropractic college presidents who would encounter him.[3] Later, after he had completed his 25-year odyssey through chiropractic, there would be those who would call his contributions monumental. Yet to many in his profession, his was to become "the most hated name in chiropractic."

For John Nugent in 1935 was to undertake what Abraham Flexner, the educational reformer who had surveyed medical education, had done for American medicine a quarter of a century earlier. A commentator wrote of Flexner at his death that at the time he investigated the medical schools in the United States and Canada, Flexner "was entirely without the obvious qualification of a medical background."[4] Yet he came with some qualifications that proved to have some of the same characteristics evidenced by Nugent a generation later: "All that he had was a razor-edged mind, fierce integrity, limitless courage and the capacity to express himself clearly and vividly. And that proved to be enough." Before turning to the challenge that faced Nugent in 1935, recall what Flexner found in medicine in his classic *Medical Education in the United States and Canada:* Of those 150 schools, less than ten percent (actually only ten institutions) enforced entrance requirements. All but ten had libraries that were inadequate or none at all. He found that in 139 schools laboratory courses for the first and second years were "deplorably equipped and poorly conducted." The term which comes through Flexner's 350-page report with frequent redundancy is "inexpressively bad." It would be similar to that found by Nugent in chiropractic.

Essentially, the Flexner Report was a response by establishment medicine and mainline institutions such as the Carnegie Foundation — which hired Flexner and published his survey — to the very real overproduction of uneducated and ill-trained medical practitioners by schools that were unashamedly commercial. "Students came to these schools shockingly unprepared," he wrote, adding that "the crude boy or jaded clerk who goes into medicine...has been attracted by advertisements and school catalogues which abound in exaggeration, misstatement and half-truths."[5]

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Flexner's study, of course, led to a revolution in American medicine. Half of the schools he visited had closed their doors within a decade after his report, which proved to be a well-timed self-survey by medicine in a period that was ripe for expose and reformist literature. To be sure, the process was harsh with the dissenting schools to the extent that only two or three of the thirty-two homeopathic and eclectic schools survived a decade after the report. The survivors were virtually all state-affiliated or supported, or with universities with large endowments — with enforced pre-medical college requirements, upgraded standards and in many cases with a massive transfer of Rockefeller and other money to implement that change.

A decade ago the American Academy of Arts and Sciences devoted a special issue of its journal to the theme, "Twentieth Century Classics Revisited." In that account such literary giants as Henry Adams, Spengler and Freud were joined with Flexner, whose *Medical Education* was described as "one of the truly seminal works published in the 20th century."

Earlier this year Gert Brieger, director of the Institute for the History of Medicine at Johns Hopkins University, found Flexner among those authors who have been "not revolutionary but highly influential in subsequent social change." He categorized him with such contemporary reform thinkers as Michael Harrington, Betty Friedan, Rachel Carson and Ralph Nader.[6]

That experience in reform may have influenced those in the fledgling National Chiropractic Association who formed the Committee on Educational Standards 50 years ago. However, it more probably was an extension of the bitter internecine warfare within the profession and the recognition by those who had broken with B.J. Palmer a decade earlier that upgrading standards would have to be implemented in opposition to chiropractic's "Maximum Leader."

Nugent, it turned out, had crossed swords with B.J. while still a brash undergraduate. Nugent came to Davenport with that generation of World War I veterans who brought the experience of combat and the discipline of the military if not the sophistication of an outside world. After a reported year at the former Eastern Chiropractic Institute, Nugent matriculated at the Palmer School in August, 1921.

According to one account published in 1953, Nugent was "expelled on June 19, 1922 from the PSC for disloyalty, disrespect and insult to the President and circulating statements derogatory to the welfare of the institution." However, according to the same account, on July 5th he was reinstated by faculty action.[7] What the nature of Nugent's infraction against B.J. was has not surfaced. In any event, a faculty veto over B.J. during the apex of his school administration and leadership of the profession was in itself a significant occurrence. B.J., as was known, was not a practitioner of democracy in those institutions he guided.

In any event, John Nugent was back in Connecticut with his degree and within two years had become so immersed in local and state Republican politics that he had, by 1924, contributed to the wording of the first Basic Science Act in the State. In 1946 testimony before the Committee on Education and Labor of the U.S. Senate, he declared that in 1924 "I wrote the (Basic Science) statute myself in Connecticut."[8]

Dr. Stephen E. Owens, who knew Nugent in his last few years with the NCA, said he "was close to Connecticut Republican leaders J. Henry Rorabach and J. Kenneth Bradly. He was clerk of the Superior Court in New Haven, at the same time maintaining a small practice with Dwight Hamilton, D.C., who had induced him to take up chiropractic."

A biographical account published in 1980 stated:

> During this time he became a prime mover in organizing the profession's first effective oversight committee on standards — the National Council on Chiropractic Examining Boards. Established in 1935, it was then that Dr. Nugent's major contributions to chiropractic began.
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> The Council was an independent group of state and Canadian provincial representatives; its purpose to study and recommend what changes it felt were necessary to achieve uniformity in chiropractic education and licensing. Nugent was elected to head the task force to study the problem. By 1938, he had individually inspected every chiropractic college and, with support by the Council, recommended a code by which educational standards could be measured. It was to be the first step toward eventual accreditation of chiropractic learning institutions. At Nugent's urging, the National Chiropractic Association, in 1939, established a Committee on Educational Standards, joining with the Council of Chiropractic Examining Boards to implement the accreditation process. This combined influence would result in the Council on Chiropractic Education. Dr. Nugent was named the NCA's first Director of Education in 1941.
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> Early in 1941, the joint commission offered its binding guidelines for accreditation; Dr. Nugent now had the authority to supervise the colleges that applied for accreditation — compliance to the standard was expected by 1943. With these objectives in mind, he authored a text —*Chiropractic Education: Outline Of A Standard Course*, published in

1941. This bulletin, which would become a classic in the profession, analyzed the courses then in effect in chiropractic colleges and the requirements of the various examining boards in the United States and Canada. In addition, it compared the educational process in other schools of the healing arts.[9]

In early 1942 the NCA issued a list of 12 schools that "have received provisional, approved ratings from the Committee on Educational Standards." The list included National, New York School, Eastern, Detroit College, Lincoln, Southern California, Metropolitan (Cleveland), Minnesota, Universal, Missouri, Western States and the University of Natural Healing Arts. By 1946, mergers, closings and removals had reduced the list to four schools (National, Lincoln, Western States and the new Chiropractic Institute of New York).[10]

Owens, a fellow Connecticut chiropractor who had worked with Nugent in the latter 50's, also said he did not practice after 1927 and was occupied with politics in New Haven and in the state capital until he assumed the NCA job eight years later. These proved to be training years for Nugent prior to entering the demanding labyrinth of chiropractic politics. "He had a dominating appearance and his confidence gave him an advantage in many chiropractic meetings," Owens recalls, "and in that environment there was always an abundance of complexes — so he enjoyed advantage."[12]

In a 1953 interview with Walter Wardwell, Nugent established the background which led to the formation of the Committee on Educational Standards. "In 1935 we called a meeting in Hollywood, Calif., to which 19 state examining boards sent representatives. Initially, we sought to raise chiropractic standards through uniform examinations, but soon saw that this would not work."[13]

The schools soon became the focal point for the impending reformation in chiropractic education. One would like to believe that Nugent, by all accounts a well-read man and of a liberal classical education prior to his experience at Davenport, would have read Flexner, and that his prototype in medical education would have provided guidelines for his own awesome task.

In fact, in wartime testimony before a House Judiciary sub-committee holding hearings on a bill which would have granted chiropractors status as qualified providers for the health care needs of federal employees, Nugent told the Congressional committee that criticism in (1943) of chiropractic standards should be discussed with the recognition that "medical education was reformed only seventeen years ago (1926)."[14]

Citing Flexner and his experience, Nugent said that it took just about 16 years for the reform of medical education after the Flexner Report was published. Referring to allegations by those representing the American Medical Association in earlier 1943 testimony in opposition to chiropractic, and citing the "trade school level of their schools," Nugent responded:

"No profession, particularly medicine, which has needed and received so much help from outside sources in the form of educational direction, philanthropy and state aid can afford to forget its lowly educational origins...nor can it afford to criticize those who by honest self-criticism are making a painstaking effort to correct their deficiencies."[15]

Unlike Flexner, Nugent did not leave a detailed school-by-school record of his inspections and visitations throughout the 1935-60 period. Flexner made a virtual whirlwind inspection tour throughout North America in 1908-09 and published his detailed findings in 1910; but Nugent made only internal reports to the National Chiropractic Association, some of which surfaced in bulletins and journal contributions.

The real politics of chiropractic in those years of peril and survival, however, precluded any chiropractic counterpart to the classic *Medical Education*. Internal warfare was still rife. The passions that were stirred through chiropractic educational reformation were as hot in the bastions of "mixing" as in the citadels of fundamental "straight" chiropractic. Nugent and "Nugentism" became as much an issue as the reform process itself.

When John J. Nugent began his odyssey of chiropractic educational standardization in 1935, there may have been twenty-five schools functioning on a regular basis. At any given time a student population total for all of these institutions would doubtless have exceeded 1,500. The Palmer School and its chief competitors, National in Chicago, Lincoln in Indianapolis and Carver in Oklahoma, may have accounted for two-thirds of this total. The remaining institutions struggled with as few as a couple of dozen students to a hundred or more.

While some claimed nonprofit status, all but a handful were unashamed profit-making enterprises. The "nonprofits" were supposedly Western States, Columbia Institute and the College of Chiropractic Physicians and Surgeons. In 1935 Hugh B. Logan opened a new school in St. Louis under a nonprofit charter. The proprietary school abolition issue was clearly the most controversial and the most difficult which Nugent had to face.

Entrance requirements, length of the course and the lack of any standardized curricula were the other challenges. The Nugent rally for reformation quickly became clear: not-for-profit institutions teaching a four-year course of standards approved by a professional accrediting agency. The groans of outrage, of indignation and outright hostility were soon heard from across the chiropractic landscape. John Nugent was quickly assuming his unenvied role as the most unpopular name in the profession.

"I am the symbol of revolt against Palmer

(fundamentalism) in this country...and I am hated by many in chiropractic for that," Nugent related to Wardwell.[16] Just how deep that hatred went may be found in a 1953 account in the Journal of the Missouri State Chiropractic Association:

"Stormy weather has arrived in Missouri...causing a moving mud which washed into the clear streams of mental thought clouding them from the pure truths of chiropractic which were lost from the mind's vision...this unfailing sign was the dark cloud of Nugentism. True to prediction, based upon experiences of other states, the destructive storm struck the chiropractic unity in Missouri, scattering the component parts far and wide."[17]

The "dark cloud of Nugentism," as can be best reconstructed from the account, was the testimony of the then Director of Education of the National Chiropractic Association before the Missouri legislative committee considering a physical therapy law in the 1953 session. Nugent, said the Missouri *Journal*, had gathered his backers in that state "to sow the prolific seeds of fear and distrust amongst Missouri chiropractors."

The lurid prose continued for several pages, with the assertion that "the distrust, disorganization and destruction of chiropractic by (Nugent) has never been equalled by any other individual within or without our profession." The full article was reprinted with the headline "Nugentism Infiltrates Missouri" in the *Fountain Head News*, the broadside subcaptioned "by B.J. Himself."[18]

The same issue of B.J.'s newspaper contained the following additional headlines: "John Nugent at Cleveland College," "The Vacillating Nugent," "Vagaries of a Vacillating Vacuum" (an attack on Nugent). The front page headline was "Re-Vive to Sur-Vive," utilizing the best of B.J.'s techniques for epigrams and euphemism in presenting his message. It goes without saying that from 1935 until the day B.J. died — which was the same year that John Nugent retired — the two were philosophical and political enemies. They became symbolic of the internal strife which racked chiropractic for that quarter-century of its development.

John Nugent's journey through chiropractic may have been lonely in the symbolic sense of having to convert the majority of what were then referred to as the "school heads" to the principles of professionally-owned institutions with four-year curricula with some efforts toward standardization. It was never, however, lacking in controversy, in confrontation and in color. Nugent subscribed to Holme's assertion that "a man should share in the action and passion of his times."

The "schoolmen," by all accounts, fell into three categories. The first were those who comprised the inner circle of the NCA Committee on Educational Standards — W.A. Budden of Western States; George Haynes of Los Angeles; James Firth of Lincoln; Joseph Janse of National; Thure Peterson of the Chiropractic Institute of New York; Julius Troilo of Texas; John Wolfe of Northwestern and A. Earl Homewood of Canadian Memorial.[19] They were at times in conflict with Nugent on specific issues and the acceleration of the reforms, but in general were supportive of his and the NCA position.

B.J. Palmer was at the focal point of the opposition. With pronounced contempt he defied Nugent and his proposals, retaining privatization, the 18-month course (which survived to 1958 at the Palmer School) and the absence of any of the basic science reforms which Nugent demanded. B.J.'s hard-core school followers included C.S. Cleveland, Sr. in Kansas City and the head of the small but historic Los Angeles school which he purchased in 1950, T.F. Ratledge. Others included Earl Bebout in Indianapolis.

A third group resided in the grey area that defied polarized Nugent or "anti-Nugent" categories. These included such educators as Hugh Logan, Frank Dean and on occasion Willard Carver, the old antagonist of both D.D. Palmer and his son. Logan's four-year, nonprofit school began in the year that the NCA reform period was launched; yet, he was in conflict with Nugent. Also Vinton Logan, his son, complained in 1952 that his college had been the subject of "misstatements of fact and expressions of animus" by the NCA education chief.[20] The senior Logan was a bitter opponent of Nugent's role in obtaining basic science legislation.

Frank Dean, founder and dean of the Columbia Institute for four decades (1919-59), always claimed nonprofit status, a four-year course at least from the early 1940's and a curriculum organized by his wife, an educator from Columbia University. Yet, according to one account, "Dean threatened to use a shotgun if Nugent dared to appear on the campus of his Manhattan school and that which was conducted in Baltimore during the 1940's and 1950's."[21] It recalls the experiences of Flexner, who related receiving threats of bodily harm should he return to institutions he had inspected in Chicago, which he had described as "the plague spot of medical education in North America."

Carver, as Logan and Dean, was in the limbo of both NCA and its rival International Chiropractors Association politics in the 1940's and 1950's. Until his death in 1943 he sat on B.J.'s ICA Board of Control, and thus was in opposition to Nugent. His successor, Paul O. Parr, guided Carver into a merger with Logan rather than the NCA-sanctioned Texas College in 1958, after becoming a nonprofit institution.

Twenty years after the reform period began, Nugent could announce to the profession that progress had been made. The postwar years had resulted in a dramatic upsurge in the curve lines of chiropractic student populations, with G.I. Bill veterans filling most institutions to capacity. The Palmer School exceeded its

1,000-student level for the first time in twenty-five years. And in 1955 Nugent reported that:

"Of fifty-one private chiropractic school owners, forty-six had surrendered their equities in nineteen schools, upon mutually satisfactory terms negotiated by the Director of Education. Some of these nineteen schools were closed and others merged to form eight nonprofit, accredited schools."[22] The surviving institutions were those represented in the NCA Committee on Educational Standards. Among those that did not survive after the abolition of proprietary institutions were the New York, Standard and Eastern Institutes in New York; Universal in Pittsburgh (which had claimed earlier nonprofit status); California and San Francisco Colleges; the Detroit College; the University of Natural Healing Arts in Denver; the Metropolitan College; the Kansas State College; and others.

The hostility toward Nugent "in the field" appeared to be centered within Palmer alumni and those of other schools with an aversion to the "mixing" image which both he and the NCA represented. One observer pointed out that in 1955 only three of the NCA-approved schools included physiotherapy; however, at least three of the rival ICA-approved institutions also offered it.[23] Ideology in curricula appeared to be secondary to real politics in both Davenport and Webster City, the Iowa hamlet where the NCA was headquartered for over three decades.

Nugent was essentially a politician first, and a chiropractor only incidentally in representing the profession. By several accounts which survive, he did that well. At a time when many schools were still resisting the formal standards of the NCA Committee, he testified before Congress, knowing that his medical opposition was preparing its rejoinders with the damning statements of B.J. Palmer.

In 1951 Nugent recalled the struggle which he and Emmett J. Murphy, the NCA's Washington legislative representative, had made to incorporate chiropractors into the War Manpower Act "as necessary to the health, safety and welfare" of the country. "We lost that fight," he wrote, "because of the then low standards of licensure and education. As a result our schools were depopulated overnight and the cause of chiropractic education set back five years."[24]

When chiropractic was listed "as the second major healing art" in the legislation for the Selective Service in the 1950's, he would claim a victory "which set our profession ahead at least a decade," and in an apparent reference to B.J., suggested that "...had we succumbed to the ill advised, antisocial attitude of some in our profession concerning education and licensure our profession still would be where it was fifty years ago."[25]

Nugent had warned in 1941 comments on the Selective Service Act that chiropractic's case was weak: "The fact that we have had no approved colleges in the past, that the public in general, rightly or wrongly, regard chiropractors as poorly educated according to the standards of other professions...are going to weigh heavily against us."[26]

By 1944, however, he reported that "a college accrediting system has been set up. Practically all of the schools of the country have been inspected and a list of accredited colleges published. All of this has been accomplished in the short space of three years."[27]

Eventually, the political dominance of the NCA as the mainline representative of the profession led toward the acceptance of the Council on Education as the one educational authority in the country which had a chance of securing federal recognition. Nugent's *Educational Standards for Chiropractic Schools*, which was adopted in 1939, went through ten revisions and editions before he left the scene in 1961. It was in this publication that Nugent outraged his fundamentalist detractors through his definition:

"The chiropractor is a physician — a particular kind of physician, and as such is engaged in the treatment and prevention of disease and in the promotion of public health and welfare...the concept of chiropractic therapeutics and case management demands a most thorough understanding of the preclinical and clinical sciences. These are the basic sciences of anatomy, physiology, biochemistry, bacteriology and pathology, and the clinical sciences of diagnosis and the principles and practice of chiropraxis."[28]

The use of the little-known "chiropraxis" was a Nugent characteristic, a legitimate "Nugentism" which suggested to some that the lofty NCA educator was also seeking to change the very name of the profession in keeping with his liberal use of medical terminology.

It may also be recalled that it was Nugent who first strongly suggested "that prospective students should be urged to acquire at least two years, or 60 semester credit hours, of preprofessional college work." This recommendation, adopted by the Council on Education in 1953, predated its actual implementation by NCA colleges by ten to fifteen years. Its pioneer transition at one institution was almost fatal: when W.A. Budden, a close Nugent associate, introduced it as a requirement at the Western States College in the mid-50's, the student body was reduced to the level that closing was seriously considered an option by its board.

B.J. once referred to Nugent as "the Antichrist of chiropractic" and many believed him. Nugent was hooted out of state meetings and banned from college buildings. Few chiropractors have met such an orgy of condemnation in the columns of the profession's journals. To one colleague in the NCA, he was "an intellectual giant up to his hips in a profession swimming with mediocrity...yet he was the architect of our educational standards. He was a visionary, a voice in our educational

wilderness. More than any other person, John Nugent redirected the course of the profession...he made 'D.C.' mean more than just a piece of paper."[29]

At midpoint in his career as the chiropractic Flexner, Nugent delivered the commencement address to the last graduating class of the Eastern Chiropractic Institute (an institution which Palmer records claimed he attended but which his widow does not recall one of three private schools which he guided into a merger in 1944. Here the Nugent philosophy may have surfaced at its best:

"...the very problems of restoring man to health and functioning citizenship cannot help but call forth all your powers, stir you to the depths, motivate you with the highest ethical conduct. If this be so, then you will be a good doctor and you will not have missed your first landmark."

Declaring that the "measure of the chiropractic profession can be no greater than the measure of the men and women coming out of our schools," he cautioned that "...as the doctor, your judgment alone counts. You alone are responsible and you alone make the decision which has to do with life and death, health and disease, happiness or misery."[30]

In time, John Nugent was to pass from the chiropractic scene. In the last few years of the NCA — prior to effecting a 1963 merger with a rump group of ICA leaders to form the American Chiropractic Association — his influence waned. In his late 60's, he had traveled to virtually every state and province and several foreign countries with his missionary zeal for educational reform. There are accounts of clashes with L.M. Rogers, who was titular to the NCA equally as B.J. was to the ICA, with fellow Connecticut chiropractor F. Loren Wheaton and finally with Emmett Murphy, his Washington associate of the political wars.

Reportedly, Murphy — a Washington lobbyist who was frequently shown in pictures with Eleanor Roosevelt, Sam Rayburn and leading senators and congressmen of both parties — used a consultant educator by the name of Dewey Anderson to undercut Nugent. The death of staunch Nugent supporters like Budden and Thure Peterson made him vulnerable. By the August, 1961 convention of the NCA in Las Vegas, Nevada, he finished the journey.[31] There would be additional battles but they would be led by others. B.J. had died in Sarasota four months earlier. The journey began in Hollywood and ended in Las Vegas, but there had been little glitter between.

Enid, Nugent's wife of 53 years, recalled that through them many had mistaken the tall, raw-boned and smiling Irishman from Dublin as a look-alike for actor Burt Lancaster.[32] There may have been some irony in that. In the late 1940's a successful Broadway play by William Inge, "Come Back, Little Sheba," was based on a deadly parallel." It has to do with a chiropractor who had to quit medical school and marry the girl. The constant realization of what might have been rankles to the extent of driving him to occasional binges..."[33] The plot was a reflection of the image of the chiropractor which Nugent realized was widely held, projected in the lines of the play by "Doc," who laments that "I was going to be a **real** doctor...I might be a big M.D. today instead of a chiropractor..."[34] Burt Lancaster, of course, played the movie role of "Doc," the chiropractor in a marginal profession.

In the quarter-century since Nugent's journey through chiropractic education came to an end, the profession gained the recognition, the status and the respectability which was denied it during his work. Retiring to the Bahamas, where he died at the age of 88 in 1979, he could take satisfaction in the landmark events of the mid-70's, which included full licensure in every state, with full four-year professional and two-year preprofessional requirements; recognition of the Council on Chiropractic Education as the official accrediting agency by the U.S. Office of Education; and chiropractic inclusion in Medicare.

His obituary in the ACA *Journal* was but twenty-six lines.[35] In the twilight of his years he did not try to emulate Flexner with an account of his reformation travels. He did, however, write that "seldom is it given to a man the rare satisfaction of seeing the fulfillment of his dream."[36] John Nugent's lonely journey was finally over.

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